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ABSTRACT

A study investigated whether sociolinguistic rules are taught as part of instruction in English as a Second Language in Japan. It was determined that of three types of institutions in which English is taught, the private language institutes offer far better language instruction than public schools or universities, and that some of the instructors have training in sociolinguistics. Examination of several Japanese-English textbooks for junior high school students revealed that the materials were prepared in grammar-oriented sequences, and that the dialogues provided were often artificial, without overt consideration for rules of speaking. Textbooks used at the private language institutes were also felt to have questionable authenticity and utility in their subject matter. Professors at two national Japanese universities, interviewed concerning the sociolinguistics training of Japanese English teachers, acknowledged the importance of sociolinguistics in language teaching despite the fact that there was no systematic teaching in this field in either institution. Without knowledge of rules of speaking, misunderstandings, sometimes with profound effects, are inevitable. Japanese learners of English have difficulty developing good relationships with native speakers because they miss opportunities to promote further interaction. (MSE)

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# Misunderstood efforts and missed opportunities: An examination of EFL in Japan

Yoshiko Okushi

This paper affirms the importance of sociolinguistic rules of speaking by examining how these rules affect Japanese language learners as they attempt to build communicative competence in English. By examining the English language curriculum in Japan and by citing the subsequent difficulties that Japanese encounter when they enter an English-speaking community, this paper argues for the systematic instruction of sociolinguistic rules of speaking.

Not having been taught sociolinguistic rules of speaking English, Japanese learners face two problems when they communicate with native speakers. First, the Japanese learners sometimes misinterpret what the native English speaker is saying; second, they also find themselves misunderstood by these same native speakers. As a result of this two-way misunderstanding, the learners often miss opportunities to interact with native speakers.

Teaching material and syllabi designed to improve communicative competence in English are popular among Japanese language teachers. Awareness of the need to teach communicative skills is well documented by the number of articles written on this subject appearing in the JACET Bulletin, one of the major journals for university English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers in Japan.

Taking this awareness into consideration, the question that arises is whether sociolinguistic rules are actually taught as a part of EFL in Japan. If so, this in turn raises the following questions: 1) Where is it taught? 2) What textbooks are used? and 3) Are EFL teachers trained in sociolinguistics? Regarding the first question, there are three types of institutions to study: private language institutes, universities, and public schools.

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Among these three English language institutions, the most progressive are the private language institutes. At these private language schools, native English speakers comprise most of the teaching staff and a few of the instructors have an M.A. in EFL with some training in sociolinguistics. The students enrolled in this kind of private language institute are highly motivated and have a great need to learn English. The primary objective of these schools is to prepare students to use the language for business or educational purposes in English-speaking countries. Although the high quality of private institutes is generally acknowledged in Japan, only a small percentage of Japanese students and employees who come to English-speaking countries have actually had instruction in such institutions. Receiving, instead, instruction at universities and other schools, most people are not equipped with even the slightest amount of systematic instruction in sociolinguistics. Compared with the private language institutes, universities and public schools lag behind in teaching their students the sociolinguistic rules of speaking.

In examining the second question regarding the materials used to teach EFL, I focused on several Japanese-English textbooks for junior high school students. Looking over the teaching materials, I found that: 1) materials are prepared in grammar-oriented sequences and 2) the dialogues are often artificial; that is, rules of speaking are not overtly considered. Even worse, there are some parts of the textbooks which actually violate the rules of speaking for any group of native English speakers. For example, the following is a dialogue in one lesson of a first-year English textbook:

Boy: Hello.
Lady: Oh, hello. But why do you look at me so hard? Why don't you go and play with other children?
Boy: I don't want to go away.
Lady: Why? Are you ill?
Boy: No, I am not. Is your dress new?
Lady: Yes. Do you like it?
Boy: I don't know, but it's beautiful.
Lady: Thank you. Come here. Sit down with me.
Boy: No.
Lady: Why?
Boy: Don't you see the sign here? It says, "Wet Paint."

(Yokokawa et al., 1985)

This is an extremely artificial dialogue, as frequent topic change makes this interaction contrived and incoherent. That there is an underlying humorous intent is difficult to ascertain since the outcome is rude in the extreme. It is almost impossible to imagine what the textbook writer's motivation could have been in creating this dialogue. Certainly, communicative competence was neither the purpose nor the outcome.

Textbooks used to teach English language classes at the university level prove just as ineffective in building communicative competence as those used in junior and senior high schools. In university classrooms, one finds that the focus of instruction is linguistic proficiency; once again, social rules and the context in which the language will be used are ignored. These Japanese-English textbooks do not include information regarding sociolinguistics. Consequently, students complete their language studies without gaining an understanding of how to interact effectively in an English-speaking society. Although it is unlikely that the majority of such students will have much interaction with native speakers, this does not mean that there is no need for students to learn how native speakers interact. Even if they do no more than read literature and watch films, students having no background in sociolinguistic rules of speaking will find it difficult or impossible to understand the interactions among the characters; therefore, they may easily misinterpret the meaning of what they read or hear.

It is only when one examines the materials used in private English language institutes that one finds an attempt to offer instruction in what we have come to call communicative competence. The textbooks used at these institutes are the same used to teach non-native speakers in the United States. However, although building communicative competence is a recognized goal of these teaching materials, even here the authenticity and utility of the subject matter remains highly questionable.

To ascertain whether or not Japanese EFL teachers are trained in sociolinguistics, I interviewed professors of two national universities in Japan. These interviews confirmed my prior understanding that the framework of formal curricula for obtaining a teacher's license is determined by the government. Therefore, EFL teacher training courses in all Japanese universities are standardized. Within this framework, however, universities offer a variety of courses. Both of the professors interviewed affirmed their awareness of the importance of sociolinguistics in language teaching, despite the fact that the systematic teaching of this field had not been implemented in either university. Most of the courses offered focus on reading and do not emphasize language use for communication. Language teaching in Japan is still based on traditional academism; that is, foreign language learning is mainly intended

for reading literature. Traditionally, teachers were not concerned with day-to-day interaction with native speakers; instead, they were interested in the language of the printed page. Thus, despite the fact that many Japanese EFL teachers and professors are aware that an increasing number of Japanese have a need to interact with native English speakers in their daily lives, this awareness is not reflected in the EFL training courses. Some instructors recognize the importance of sociolinguistic rules which dictate the effectiveness of verbal interaction and they support change in the EFL curriculum. Progress is checked, however, by the scant number of people trained in sociolinguistics, as well as by the prevailing resistance to change in the traditional academic community.

An important point to consider is that the economic position of Japan has changed, making it a country which plays an important role in the world. Not only are an increasing number of Japanese learning English, but also more English speakers are learning Japanese. As time goes on, these people are going to use language in sensitive situations such as diplomatic and business negotiations, in which ignorance of sociolinguistic rules can pose a serious problem. Therefore, research into Japanese speech behavior is needed, as well as further development of materials to teach empirically sound sociolinguistic patterns used by native speakers of English. Although sociolinguistics is not a new field of study in Japan, most Japanese sociolinguistic research has mainly dealt with dialectology and the study of honorifics. For example, O'Neill (1966) shows how the variety of language in Japan manifests status and sex differences. This kind of study is useful for learners of Japanese, but it only provides the information observable within the linguistic form and does not give information about the social distribution of these patterns. The most likely reason for this omission is that no empirical research has yet been carried out which would provide the needed facts. Indeed, it is apparent that work such as O'Neill's is based on nothing more than native speaker intuitions. Actual fieldwork on speech behavior needs to be conducted in order to discover how Japanese people interact using respectful language. As Wolfson (1983) writes, "we do not speak as we think we do, and for this reason, sociolinguistic explanations based on native intuition are inadequate." Due to the absence of needed research findings, Japanese rules of speaking are not systematically taught to students of Japanese as a foreign language.

Without knowledge of rules of speaking, misunderstandings are bound to occur. Even if the linguistic form is understood, this does not necessarily mean that the learner has correctly interpreted what was said. A frequently cited example of this misunderstanding is the interaction between President Richard Nixon and the late

Japanese Prime Minister Eisaku Sato at the 1970 Summit Meeting. In response to Nixon's political pressure to limit textile exports, Sato said, "I'll do my best." The original Japanese expression is often used when one can not easily answer another's request in a political situation. Christopher (1983) writes, "But to Nixon, however, it sounded as though Sato had promised to remedy the situation. And so when Sato failed to take effective action, Nixon bitterly concluded that he had been double-crossed." Obviously, Sato's translator had failed to render the true meaning of what the Prime Minister had said. Problems of this sort arise because language learners usually have not been taught that there is sociolinguistic variability across languages; even translators are rarely given instruction in the sociolinguistic rules of the target language. The misunderstanding in the above situation arose because Sato's words were translated rather than the meaning that lay behind those words.

Not every misunderstanding has such profound political effects. Still, what problems do the Japanese in an English-speaking country such as the U.S. frequently encounter? One of the problems which arises is that English learners are prevented from developing good relationships with native speakers. During exchanges between a Japanese and a native English speaker, oftentimes the Japanese person's responses are regarded as rude or overly formal. A good example is shown in Daikuhara's (1986) study of compliments and responses in American English and in Japanese. The most frequent Japanese response to a compliment is denial, such as:

A: You are good at English.
B: No, no. That's not true.

As Daikuhara explains, use of "No, no" does not necessarily mean disagreement with the speaker. Japanese people usually deny a given compliment, especially one which praises performance or skills. In contrast, speakers of American English simply respond with "thank you." This kind of simple acceptance of compliments would be considered self-praise in Japanese. Therefore, Japanese speakers transfer the speech rule of "self-praise avoidance" when they speak English. As Daikuhara says, "among Americans, such disagreement is usually restricted to interaction between intimates." In addition, Americans typically use compliments as conversational openers while the Japanese do not. As shown by the previous example, Japanese speakers of English transfer their rules of speaking from Japanese to English and subsequently respond to Americans' compliments with denial. The result of such an action might be that the Japanese person misses opportunities which would lead to further conversations with native speakers.

Another comparative study on the issue of rules of speaking was conducted by Beebe, Takahashi, and Uliss-Weltz (1985) on refusals. In this study, the researchers collected data from three groups of subjects: native speakers of Japanese speaking in Japanese (JJs), native speakers of American English speaking in English (AEs), and native speakers of Japanese speaking in English (JEs). Beebe et al. found that when refusing a request, all three groups basically used the same range of semantic formulas, such as expressing regret and giving excuses. They differed, however, in the order of these formulas. It was found that four aspects in which JEs resembled JJs and differed from AEs were:

(1) with status unequals, JJs and JEs gave an excuse second, while AEs gave it third;

(2) when they were of lower status than the requestor, JEs and JJs made their apology/expression of regret first, AEs made it second;

(3) JJs and JEs omitted apology/regret when they were of higher status than the requestor, whereas AEs said "I'm sorry" to lower status requestors, and

(4) JJs and JEs expressed either empathy, such as "I realize you are in a difficult situation," or positive opinion when they were higher status than the requestor and AEs did not.

From this study, one finds that JEs transfer their speech behavior from Japanese and change the semantic formula and its order according to the interlocutor's status. As a result, JEs' refusals were different from those of AEs'.

In addition to the obvious pitfalls of sociolinguistic transfer, Japanese speakers of English are often put in the uncomfortable position of not being able to present themselves as they wish. Even when they are aware that polite forms are required in a given context, the full range of such forms is not part of their communicative competence. Ironically, while writing this paper, a striking thing occurred which relates to this problem. It happened that I was at the home of one of my professors when the telephone rang. She asked me to answer it and I did so. The caller was my professor's husband who asked to speak with her. As she was unable to come to the phone, the following interaction occurred:

Professor: Ask him what he wants.
Yoshiko: What do you want?
Husband: I wanted to be sure you got there all right.

Clearly, I knew that there was a more polite way of asking Mr. X what he wanted, but in my desperation to respond quickly and accurately, my communicative competence

was inadequate to supply it. I was annoyed with what I knew was my inappropriately direct speech. When my professor and I discussed what could have been said in place of "What do you want?" in this context, it was suggested that "She can't come to the phone. Can I help you?" would have been more appropriate. Since I associated the expression "Can I help you?" with the context for a service encounter, it would not have occurred to me to use it on the telephone. Despite my six years of residence in the United States and my relative fluency in English, it is obvious from this example that a working knowledge of sociolinguistic rules is difficult to acquire on one's own. The above-related incident was illustrative to me and, I hope, to readers as well, that overt description of sociolinguistically appropriate forms is a necessary component of language teaching.

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